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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a description and brief history of the concept of "racial uplift" and describes its implications for a contemporary, Black college professor. The phrase "racial uplift," for 19th-century Black women, describes almost any type of political activity designed to improve conditions for Black people during the critical post-Reconstruction period of Plessy v. Ferguson, mob violence, and "Jim Crow" democracy. Now the term also invokes images of an educated Black elite, some version of W.E.B. DuBois's "talented tenth." For a Black, newly tenured professor of rhetoric and composition at a predominantly White state university, personal history has affected every aspect of her professional life. She developed a research project around collecting and analyzing the persuasive discourse of 19th-century Black women, even though her dissertation had been about writing technology and its implications. Her concern for being "labeled" as someone who could only do race-related work notwithstanding, the persuasive speeches and writing of 19th-century Black women helped her reshape and rewrite the identity and personal history which her earlier experiences had constructed for her. The work mattered academically because history had been silent where these rhetors were concerned. The personal affects teaching assignments and pedagogy. With the increasing demand for courses on the literature of African diasporan people and women, there is also increasing pressure to design courses around these subjects. The recommendations in this paper help educators to attempt to understand the "lived experiences" of those to whom they teach composition, those they teach about, and those with whom they work in the academy, rather than respond to a prescribed and constraining script. (NKA)

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Late Twentieth-Century Racial Uplift Work

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As a student of nineteenth-century black women's public discourse, I frequently emerge from hours in the library, after having scrolled through microfilmed volumes of the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* from 1884-1901, for example, squinting in the bright June 1997 sun and feeling somewhat disoriented. My almost total immersion in and fascination with the previous century often leads me to view most contemporary phenomena though the soft filter of 100 years of history. As you can imagine, this perspective has its disadvantages, (My son often reminds me, "Mom, just because you study nineteenth-century women doesn't mean you have to dress and think like one!") and more often than not, making life for me one big déjà vu experience. And so in selecting a title for this paper, I reached back again to retrieve a common expression among turn-of-the-century "race women" to describe the ways in which the personal and the professional converge for me. "Racial uplift" as I use and understand the phrase, for 19th-century black women, describes almost any type of political activity designed to improve conditions for black people during the critical

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post-Reconstruction period--the nadir--of Plessy v. Ferguson, mob violence, and Jim Crow democracy. Now the term also invokes images of an educated black elite, some version of DuBois's talented tenth, who, according to Kevin Gaines in *Upifting the Race*, "espoused a value system of bourgeois morality" with "deeply embedded assumptions of racial difference." This condescending approach to progress modeled after the cultural values of white society and fueled by unconscious racism is not the one I want to call forth here. I mean something much less complicated as in the activism that was a response to cries of "Negro domination," white supremacy, and the protection of Southern womanhood, with their attendant claims of retrogressionism, the idea that blacks, without the civilizing influence of whites under slavery, would revert to their former state of savagery. This "racial uplift" revolved around moves designed to break away from a series of bad circumstances. In many instances, those being uplifted or enlightened were not members of the oppressed "race" but of the dominant group.

So what does all this not so ancient history have to do with my professional life, the life of a black, female, newly tenured professor of rhetoric and composition at a predominantly white state university? Everything. This personal history--yes personal--has

affected every aspect of my professional life. The professional, of course, is personal and political. Angela Davis in her recent book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* reminds us that the performances of classic blues women like Bessie Smith, Gertrude Ma Rainey, and Billie Holiday in the 1920's demonstrated the truth of this notion, that the personal is political, when they sang about domestic violence, discrimination, and lynching, as well as lost loves, subjects previously shielded from scrutiny in the public sphere. Davis identifies these and other articulations of social protest in a genre often perceived as focusing solely on the personal. So, This personal and political history has affected every aspect of my professional life. I was warned six years ago with tenure clock ticking that of the trinity--teaching, service, and research--the greatest of these was research. And that while I should pay some attention to teaching--"You do want to generate some favorable student evaluations"-- and that it would be a good idea to serve on a few committees, especially committees that would provide high visibility outside the English department, "You really need to finish 'the book.'" I had completed a dissertation on using computers to teach writing, but I must shamefully admit here to the fear that the English department faculty would view a scholar of

writing technology and its implications only as someone who could help them format footnotes, not as a tenurable colleague. Consequently, I developed a research project around collecting and analyzing the persuasive discourse of nineteenth-century black women, with a great deal of concern, at the same time, that I would be marked as someone who could only do race-related work, as if there were only one socially-constructed "race." and as if work on non-othered people were unraced, calling to mind Ruth Frankenberg's point that "white people are raced, just as men are gendered" (1), as well as Elsa Barkley Brown's statement that

> "[n]ot only do people of color <u>not</u> have the luxury in this society of deciding whether to identify racially[,]but historians writing about people of color also do not have the privilege of deciding whether to acknowledge,. . .their multiple identities. No editor or publisher allows a piece on Black or Latina women to represent itself as being about "women." On the other hand, people who want to acknowledge that their pieces are about "white" women often have to struggle with editors to get that in their titles and consistently used throughout their pieces--the objection being it is unnecessary, superfluous, too wordy, awkward" (44).

But concern for labeling notwithstanding, the persuasive speeches and writing of 19th-century black women did invoke in me a passion, associated with discovering that numerous ordinary women, with whom I shared a history, were speaking, writing, and taking charge even before Emancipation. Another shameful

confession is that I did not make this discovery until I was older than most of these women were when they performed their bold rhetorical acts. I should have known better, but I too had accepted "the old threadbare lie" to borrow Ida Wells's description of the chief justification for lynching--that the nineteenth-century was an intellectual abyss for black women. There I was reading and writing about the schools--Johnson C. Smith, Livingstone, Haines Institute, St. Augustine's--and the churches--Fifteenth Street Presbyterian, and Nineteenth Street Baptist, and Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal-- and the conferences--the Congress of Colored Women, the National Baptist Convention, the Hampton Negro Conference--that my foremothers had attended, and gathering materials from the periodicals they read and contributed to. It was personal because in writing about their rhetorical acts, I was also reshaping and rewriting the identity and personal history which my earlier experiences had constructed for me--whether it ever got published or not. But the work did matter academically because history had been silent where these rhetors were concerned.
The personal affects my teaching assignments and pedagogy. With the increasing demand for courses on the literature of African diasporan people and women, there is also increasing pressure to design courses

around these subjects. An all time favorite of the English Undergraduate Studies director was one called the Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women. *Mirabile Dictu*, English majors could fulfill four category requirements--women and minorities, one century, and one subject area, rhetoric--all in one contorted course. When I enter a classroom to teach those racially-marked courses, I am challenged to create an environment where all reasonable opinions about matters we don't usually talk about in mixed groups are welcomed. I have described some aspects of this challenge elsewhere, the challenge of teaching a body of knowledge without becoming yourself the body being studied and the challenge of discussing race matters in a setting where all do not view themselves as raced and therefore do not view the material as relevant to them.

The personal affects my service, service on such committees as the Banneker Scholarship Committee, now defunct with the outlawing of race-specific scholarships, the Ronald McNair Seminar for Minority Students, the Human Relations Board, the Advisory Committee for the President's Diversity Action Plan, the Steering Committee for Africa and Africa in the Americas, to name a few. And even when the committee is not racially marked with the name of some famous black person or some code word like "minority" or

"diversity," once I enter the room, I know I am there to represent the race. Now no one forces me to serve on these committees; as with my research and teaching I respond to my passions.

So I do not present this paper as a whining complaint. Just as Gertrude Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith's blues songs should not be taken for mere complaint. The blues they were singing, and the blues I'm singing attempt rather to articulate, in the words of Angela Davis, "consciousness that takes into account social conditions of class exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of. . . black female subjects." These lyrics from "I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama," recorded by Bessie Smith, capture this spirit of independence:

"I used to be your sweet mama, sweet papa
But now I'm just as sour as can be
So don't come stallin' aroun my way expectin' any love from me
You had your chance and proved unfaithful
So now I'm gonna be real mean and hateful
I used to be your sweet mama, sweet papa
But now I'm just as sour as can be."

And just as Davis's critique of blues women's songs is based not on the precomposed printed lyrics but on her transcriptions of recorded performances, perhaps we too should attempt to understand the <u>lived experiences</u>

of those to whom we teach composition, and those we teach about, and those with whom we work in the academy, rather than respond to a prescribed and constraining script. I do late twentieth-century racial uplift work, with the same exuberance and I hope some of the defiance embedded in the lyrics of "I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama, Sweet Papa." And in the words of another thoroughly modern and wise twenty-year old, my daughter, "It's all good."

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